

Mother of Marine Who Died By Suicide Takes Fight To Washington

WASHINGTON, DC (July 10, 2014) – Susan Selke, mother of Marine veteran Clay Hunt who died by suicide in 2011, today will stand with members of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), Congressional leaders from both parties, and House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Jeff Miller (R-FL) as he introduces a suicide prevention bill that is named after her late son. This morning, Susan testified before the House Veterans Affairs Committee alongside other families, sharing her gut-wrenching story of losing her son to suicide three years ago. As a shocking 22 veterans die each day to suicide, and failures at the VA continue to emerge, the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention For American Veterans Act (Clay Hunt SAV Act), is historic legislation that addresses veteran suicide and improves access to quality mental health care.

“Had legislation like this existed years ago I believe Clay would be here with us today,” said Susan Selke, mother of Clay Hunt. “All veterans, but especially those struggling with invisible injuries, should not have to go through red tape to get the mental health care they need and very much deserve. They should not have to jump through hoops to get an appointment, or see a doctor. I’m here in Washington because I don’t want any mother, father, sister, brother or friend to have to experience another suicide. Our country is at a crossroads right now as 22 veterans die by suicide each day, at a time when more of our servicemembers are returning home. We need an urgent solution to this emergency and this bill is the first step. Lawmakers from both sides of the aisle must get behind our veterans and pass this bill.”

Susan’s powerful testimony was carried live on C-SPAN3 and can be found in written form [here](#).

“Clay was a friend, leader and patriot. And we’re all here today to honor his memory by carrying on his urgent fight for better care for veterans. Clay led this fight with IAVA in Washington years ago, and his mother is here now to finish it. Susan is a true hero. And IAVA members from across America are here today to have her back. Susan’s courage and determination should inspire all Americans to action,” said IAVA CEO and Founder Paul Rieckhoff. “We salute Chairman Miller for his strong leadership today and throughout the last few years. He has listened to IAVA members and made suicide a top priority. We also salute Congressman Tim Walz. As a vet himself, he’s always stood by IAVA’s veterans.”

Rieckhoff continued, “The Clay Hunt SAV Act will change thousands of lives for the better by providing access to top-quality mental health care. We thank the Chairman for his courageous leadership in addressing this issue. With work days on the Congressional calendar dwindling, we urge Congress to move swiftly to pass this legislation before August recess. Taking this step to reverse the suicide trend among our veterans should be a priority, not a

political fight. Congress must pass this bill as soon as possible. Our veterans cannot afford to wait for summer recesses and election campaigns. They deserve action now.”

Rieckhoff added: “Combating suicide remains IAVA’s top issue in 2014 as 22 veterans die by suicide a day. In IAVA’s 2014 Member Survey, 47% of respondents said they know at least one Iraq or Afghanistan vet who has attempted suicide, and 40% of respondents know a veteran that has died by suicide. The men and women who served our country and protected us abroad now need our help back home. IAVA has answered the call, and we urge more lawmakers to join us. We also call on the President to respond to this issue. Despite months of the VA scandal, and repeated requests, he has still not met with IAVA and leading veterans groups or answered our calls for an executive order on veterans suicide. It’s time for the Commander in Chief to step up and show our veterans he is serious about our issues.”

“The key to curbing the epidemic of veteran suicides is improving the accessibility and effectiveness of mental health care available to our returning heroes,” said Rep. Jeff Miller, Chairman, House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs. “Over the past seven years, VA’s mental health care staff and budget have grown by nearly 40 percent, but the fact remains, veterans are still committing suicide at a frightening pace. This slow-motion national tragedy is likely to continue as long as the Department of Veterans Affairs sticks to its normal, business-as-usual approach of treating veterans where and how VA wants as opposed to where and how veterans want. The Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act will help create a greater accounting of available services and an enhanced community approach to delivering veterans suicide prevention and mental health care treatment, which is why I urge my colleagues to join me in supporting it.”

“One veteran lost to suicide is one too many,” said Rep. Tim Walz, the highest ranking enlisted soldier to ever serve in Congress. “While the wars overseas may be ending, all too often our heroes return only to face a war of their own at home. While there is no bill that will completely end veteran suicide, this comprehensive, bipartisan measure is a step in the right direction. I’m proud to have worked with Chairman Miller, Rep. Duckworth, a combat veteran herself, and the veteran advocates at IAVA to introduce this bipartisan, important legislation.”

The Clay Hunt SAV Act:

Increases Access to Mental Health Care:

- Amends the requirements for reviewing the discharge characterizations of individuals diagnosed with PTSD or TBI.
- Requires a centralized website of all of the mental health care services available within each Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISN) which will be updated at least every 90 days.

Increases Capacity to Meet the Demand for Mental Health Care:

- Authorizes the VA to conduct a student loan repayment pilot program aimed at recruiting and retaining psychiatrists.
- Requires the DoD and National Guard to review the staffing requirements for Directors of Psychological Health in each state.

Improves the Quality of Care for Troops and Veterans:

- Requires a yearly evaluation, conducted by a third party, of all mental health care and suicide prevention practices and programs at the DoD and VA.

Provides Continuous, Seamless Care to Troops and Veterans:

- Establishes a strategic relationship between the VA and the National Guard to facilitate a greater continuity of care between the National Guard and the VA.
- Authorizes a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on the transition of care for PTSD and TBI between the DoD and the VA.

Develops Community Support for Veterans:

- Establishes a peer support and community outreach pilot program to assist transitioning servicemembers with accessing VA mental health care services.

The [Campaign to Combat Suicide](#) was designed to raise public awareness of the suicide crisis, demand Congressional action and a Presidential Executive Order to start to reverse the suicide trend.

As part of its [Campaign to Combat Suicide](#), all year long IAVA will activate every element of its membership, programs and partners – both on-the-ground and online. IAVA will incorporate this effort into everything we do from our monthly VetTogethers to our over 500,000-person strong social media community. We will empower our almost 300,000 members and supporters to serve as a ground force for outreach, support and advocacy. And we will travel the country, turning public attention to the issue of veteran suicide and promoting solutions.

[A press event will be held at the House Triangle at 2:30 pm.](#)